

Meister Eckhart (*Encyclopedia Britannica* article)

Born c. 1260, Hochheim?, Thuringia [now in Germany]
Died 1327/28?, Avignon, France

English: Master Eckhart, original name Johannes Eckhart [also called Eckhart von Hochheim, Eckhart also spelled Ekehart]

Dominican theologian and writer who was the greatest German speculative mystic. In the transcripts of his sermons in German and Latin, he charts the course of union between the individual soul and God.

Johannes Eckhart entered the Dominican order when he was 15 and studied in Cologne, perhaps under the Scholastic philosopher Albert the Great. The intellectual background there was influenced by the great Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas, who had recently died. In his mid-30s, Eckhart was nominated vicar (the main Dominican official) of Thuringia. Before and after this assignment he taught theology at Saint-Jacques's priory in Paris. It was also in Paris that he received a master's degree (1302) and consequently was known as Meister Eckhart.

Eckhart wrote four works in German that are usually called "treatises." At about the age of 40 he wrote the *Talks of Instruction*, on self-denial, the nobility of will and intellect, and obedience to God. In the same period, he faced the Franciscans in some famous disputations on theological issues. In 1303 he became provincial (leader) of the Dominicans in Saxony, and three years later vicar of Bohemia. His main activity, especially from 1314, was preaching to the contemplative nuns established throughout the Rhine River valley. He resided in Strasbourg as a prior.

The best-attested German work of this middle part of his life is the *Book of Divine Consolation*, dedicated to the Queen of Hungary. The other two treatises were *The Nobleman* and *On Detachment*. The teachings of the mature Eckhart describe four stages of the union between the soul and God: dissimilarity, similarity, identity, breakthrough. At the outset, God is all, the creature is nothing; at the ultimate stage, "the soul is above God." The driving power of this process is detachment.

1. Dissimilarity: "All creatures are pure nothingness. I do not say they are small or petty: they are pure nothingness." Whereas God inherently possesses being, creatures do not possess being but receive it derivatively. Outside God, there is pure nothingness. "The being (of things) is God." The "noble man" moves among things in detachment, knowing that they are nothing in themselves and yet aware that they are full of God—their being.

2. Similarity: Man thus detached from the singular (individual things) and attached to the universal (Being) discovers himself to be an image of God. Divine resemblance, an assimilation, then emerges: the Son, image of the Father, engenders himself within the detached soul. As an image, "thou must be in Him and for Him, and not in thee and for thee."

3. Identity: Eckhart's numerous statements on identity between God and the soul can be easily misunderstood. He never has substantial identity in mind, but God's operation and man's becoming are considered as one. God is no longer outside man, but he is perfectly interiorized. Hence such statements: "The being and the nature of God are mine; Jesus enters the castle of the soul; the spark in the soul is beyond time and space; the soul's light is uncreated and cannot be created, it takes possession of God with no mediation; the core of the soul and the core of God are one."

4. Breakthrough: To Meister Eckhart, identity with God is still not enough; to abandon all things without abandoning God is still not abandoning anything. Man must live "without why." He must seek nothing, not even God. Such a thought leads man into the desert, anterior to God. For Meister Eckhart, God exists as "God" only when the creature invokes him. Eckhart calls "Godhead" the origin of all things that is beyond God (God conceived as Creator). "God and the Godhead are as distinct as heaven and earth." The soul is no longer the Son. The soul is now the Father: it engenders God as a divine person. "If I were not, God would not be God." Detachment thus reaches its conclusion in the breakthrough beyond God. If properly understood, this idea is genuinely Christian: it retraces, for the believer, the way of the Cross of Christ.

These teachings are to be found in his Latin works too. But the Latin *Sermons*, *Commentaries on the Bible*, and *Fragments* are more Scholastic and do not reveal the originality of his thought. Nevertheless, Eckhart enjoyed much respect even among scholars. In his 60th year he was called to a professorship at Cologne. Heinrich von Virneburg—a Franciscan, unfavourable to Dominicans, anyway—was the archbishop there, and it was before his court that the now immensely popular Meister Eckhart was first formally charged with heresy. To a list of errors, he replied by publishing a Latin *Defense* and then asked to be transferred to the pope's court in Avignon. When ordered to justify a new series of propositions drawn from his writings, he declared: "I may err but I am not a heretic, for the first has to do with the mind and the second with the will!" Before judges who had no comparable mystical experience of their own, Eckhart referred to his inner certainty: "What I have taught is the naked truth." The bull of Pope John XXII, dated March 27, 1329, condemns 28 propositions extracted from the two lists. Since it speaks of Meister Eckhart as already dead, it is inferred that Eckhart died some time before, perhaps in 1327 or 1328. It also says that Eckhart had retracted the errors as charged.

Although Eckhart's philosophy amalgamates Greek, Neoplatonic, Arabic, and Scholastic elements, it is unique. His doctrine, sometimes abstruse, always arises from one simple, personal mystical experience to which he gives a number of names. By doing so, he was also an innovator of the German language, contributing many abstract terms. In the second half of the 20th century, there was great interest in Eckhart among some Marxist theorists and Zen Buddhists.

Reiner Schürmann